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Baroque Rome

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In the seventeenth century, the city of Rome became the consummate statement of Catholic majesty and triumph expressed in all the arts. Baroque architects, artists, and urban planners so magnified and invigorated the classical and ecclesiastical traditions of the city that it became for centuries after the acknowledged capital of the European art world, not only a focus for tourists and artists but also a watershed of inspiration throughout the Western world.

Urbanism and Architecture

Although Rome gained in magnificent buildings and monuments during the Renaissance, it also suffered the attacks of Reformation theologians and invading armies; although home to major centers of religious pilgrimage and venerable remains of Imperial Rome, the city's haphazard street system impeded circulation and diminished spectators' vantage on its monuments. To remedy this situation, Pope Sixtus V (r. 1585–90) promoted his vision of "Roma in forma sideris," that is, Rome in the shape of a star. He engaged Domenico Fontana (1543–1607) and other planners to lay out processional avenues linking the great basilicas, such as Santa Maria Maggiore and San Giovanni in Laterano, with other strategic points; routes emanated like the rays of a star from focal piazzas marked with Egyptian obelisks brought to Rome in ancient times.

Today the papacy controls only the small zone known as Vatican City, but its domain in former times was not so restricted, and papal patronage transformed the entire city. Three energetic popes, Urban VIII (r. 1623–44), Innocent X (r. 1644–55), and Alexander VII (r. 1655–67), charged the versatile talents of Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680), Francesco Borromini (1599–1667), and Pietro da Cortona (1596–1669) with commissions meant to monumentalize and beautify areas all over Rome. Bernini executed several projects at the Basilica of Saint Peter, the center of papal authority: he created the superb bronze baldacchino (canopy) over the high altar for Urban VIII, and for Alexander VII he designed the sculptural adornment of the chair of Peter in the apse and the sweeping round colonnades that frame the facade. Nearby, Bernini designed the Ponte Sant'Angelo, a bridge across the Tiber embellished with angels carrying the instruments of Christ's passion, which eased movement between the Vatican and the important commercial area across the river.

All the popes used the official residence in the Vatican, but they also lavished attention on their own palaces in other parts of the city. Innocent X, for example, developed the Piazza Navona, commissioning Borromini to design facades for the Church of Sant'Agnese in Agone and for his palace next door, and engaging Bernini to create the spectacular Fountain of the Four Rivers, whose gushing waters, colossal sculpture, and crowning obelisk form the centerpiece of the square. The introduction of fountains and monumental stairways throughout the city induced pedestrians not only to move easily from place to place but also to linger in beautified transitional spaces. A prime example is the Spanish Steps, a symmetrical system of landings and curving staircases that connect two neighborhoods formerly divided by an impassably steep hill. Although several artists proposed solutions to the problem, the Steps were finally built to the elegant design of Francesco De Sanctis and completed in 1726.

The Building and Embellishment of Baroque Churches

Throughout the seventeenth century, churches were constructed along Rome's newly cut thoroughfares, and existing buildings were modified in keeping with Baroque taste. Borromini designed innovative churches, such as Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza and San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, in which complex harmonies of curved and rectangular forms create surprising, sculptural interiors. Borromini also remodeled the ancient basilica of

San Giovanni in Laterano, incorporating stuccowork by Alessandro Algardi, gilding, and an abundance of colored marbles, materials lavishly applied in many other Roman interiors. At the Cornaro Chapel in the Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria, Bernini used sculpture, architectural elements, and hidden light sources to transform a family chapel into a theatrical re-creation of Saint Teresa of Ávila ecstatically receiving an angel with an arrow of divine love. As a result of Pietro da Cortona's new convex facade for Santa Maria della Pace, the little church seems to swell into the piazza outside and beckon to the viewer turning down the street in front.

Painters also embraced the challenge to create integrated environments (*un bel composto*) meant to heighten religious experience. By 1600, in three famous paintings illustrating the life of Saint Matthew, Caravaggio made the light represented within each picture consistent with the actual illumination of the chapel where the pictures were to hang. In the 1640s and 1650s, Pietro da Cortona adorned the vaults of Santa Maria in Vallicella with spectacular portrayals of the Trinity in Glory and the Assumption of the Virgin, in which monumental groups of figures seen from below enact heavenly events as though occurring in the viewer's own experience. Pietro's ceiling frescoes set the standard for many later masterpieces, including the radiant *Triumph of the Name of Jesus* (1676–79) in Il Gesù, the principal church of the Jesuit order, painted by Giovanni Battista Gaulli, and Andrea Pozzo's *Glory of Saint Ignatius* (1691–94) in the Church of Sant'Ignazio, where the ceiling seems to open to reveal the saint ascending into heaven over a hovering assembly of angels and personifications.

Painting and the Decorative Arts

The concentration of willing patrons in Rome attracted artists from all over Europe, and painters continued to argue the primacy of technique based alternatively on drawing (*disegno*) or coloring (*colorito*). Among the artists hailed for reconciling the two approaches was the Bolognese-born Annibale Carracci (1560–1609), who applied his gifts as both draftsman and colorist to the emerging genre of landscape as well as traditional religious subjects; his *Coronation of the Virgin* (1971.155), for instance, combines a compositional scheme derived from Michelangelo with subtle lighting in the spirit of Titian. In a famous public debate probably conducted in 1636, Andrea Sacchi (ca. 1599–1661), whose *Marcantonio Pasqualini Crowned by Apollo* (1981.317)

displays his reliance on drawing, made claims for compositions with few figures and pure contours, while Pietro da Cortona opposed him, advocating instead great assemblies of figures and freer brushwork. Sacchi's influence is visible in the work of the French painter Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), who made his career in Rome, painting scenes from biblical and classical history; in his *Abduction of the Sabine Women* (46.160), he uses bold colors, sharp contours, and figures derived from Greco-Roman sculpture, all characteristic of his art.

The exuberant theatricality of seventeenth-century projects on an urban scale also animates smaller examples of sculpture and decorative art. Bernini's early *Bacchanal* (1976.92) includes figures in characteristic twisting poses in a composition different from every point of view. Giovanni Giardini's holy-water stoup (1995.110) depicts Saint Mary of Egypt in a concave silver panel framed in lapis lazuli, and Michele Todini's harpsichord (89.4.2929) carried by tritons of gilded wood is conceived as the centerpiece of a mythic musical contest.

Citation

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